

Students' Critical Evaluation of Scholarly Theories and Methods

College of Humanities and Social Sciences – American Studies MA

Step 1: Student Learning Outcome

Students will demonstrate an advanced understanding of how scholars approach cultural evidence, critically evaluating scholarly theories and methods.

Step 2: Methods and Measures

Direct Assessment: Essay on the MA comprehensive exam that focuses on theories and methods (Type A) is assessed using a rubric developed by the Assessment Committee. A 4-point scale is applied to the essays as follows: 3 = Outstanding, 2 = Acceptable = 1, Weak = 0.

Indirect Assessment: Exit survey capturing students' perceptions of the impact their American Studies courses have had in improving their understanding of theories and methods of the discipline.

Step 3: Criteria for Success

Direct Assessment: 80% of graduate student essays reviewed are rated “acceptable” or “outstanding.”

Indirect Assessment: 80% of students respond “Greatly Improved” or “Somewhat Improved” to the survey questions.

Step 4: Results

Direct Assessment: Data from 2020-2023 were selected to increase sample size and identify broader trends over time in students' achievement of the learning goal. After discussing the rubric as a committee and establishing interrater reliability, all Type A essays were assessed. Overall, of the 34 students who completed the MA program, 91% of them showed “outstanding” (44%) or “acceptable” (47%) mastery of cultural history, with only three students (9%) demonstrating weak understanding.

Indirect Assessment: Survey responses from six graduating MA students in 2021, 2022, and 2023 were reviewed. When asked to rate the impact American Studies Courses had in improving their understanding of theories and methods of American Studies, 2 students (33%) responded “Greatly Improved,” 3 students responded, “Somewhat Improved” (50%), and 1 student (17%) responded “Did Not Improve.” On a related question, 5 respondents (83%) agreed that AMST courses have “Greatly Improved” their skill in “Cultural Analysis” and 1 student (17%) reported that their skill in this area “Improved a Little Bit.”

Based on both Direct and Indirect Assessment procedures, the committee concludes that it is exceeding the criteria for success in Grad SLO 1: Theories & Methods of Cultural Studies.

Step 5: Improvement Actions

The low response rate to the department survey of graduating MA students makes it difficult to draw conclusions from the resulting data. We have already attempted to improve our response rate by circulating the surveys online and promoting the link widely. Unfortunately, these steps have not made a significant impact. The committee therefore suggests the department consider incentivizing survey participation, such as by offering a small gift card or other token of appreciation for completing the survey.